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PARTISAN VOLUNTEER MOVEMENTS DURING WORLD WAR II IN THE ROSTOV OBLAST OF THE SOVIET UNION AND IN WESTERN SERBIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS*

Abstract: Based on an analysis of both published and newly identified sources, this paper will attempt to carry out a comparative analysis of the essential content, nature, scale, social and national composition, political and ideological views and positions, and the ideological foundations and practical results of the struggle by partisan, anti-Nazi resistance movements in the Rostov oblast and in western Serbia during the Second World War. These regions were unique in terms of natural and geographic conditions, the ethnic and social composition of their populations, and their ideological views and political positions. Therefore, special attention will be given to identifying, thoroughly describing, and conducting a comparative analysis of the common and unique features of the partisan movement in these two regions. The paper will also demonstrate the influence of political, socioeconomic, ethnic, and social factors on the scale of this movement, the degree to which it was supported by the local population, the results of its activities in each of these areas both generally and in relation to their correlation and comparative analysis. The final generalizations and conclusions about the role and significance of the partisan movements in the Rostov oblast and in western Serbia during the Second World War, and their general and more specific features will also be substantiated.

Keywords: World War II, volunteers, partisan movement, Rostov oblast, western Serbia.

* This study was funded by the Russian Science Foundation grant No. 24-28-01265, The volunteer movement and its significance during the Great Patriotic War using the example of the Rostov oblast (based on materials from central and regional archives and memories of participants) <https://rscf.ru/project/24-28-01265/>

1. Introduction

Almost immediately after Hitler's conquest of Yugoslavia and following the German attack on the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War, mass partisan movements emerged in these countries. They were very significant in size, and their geographic and territorial scope was also large.

The relevance of this study for historical discourse and analysis is that it addresses many important issues that have not been comprehensively or thoroughly examined in the historiography. For example, the specifics of the partisan movement in western Serbia and the peculiarities of the partisan movement in the Rostov oblast have not been studied. Furthermore, within the historiography there is also no comparative analysis of their scale and number of participants, the influence of specific natural and geographic features in each of the regions and the peculiarities of the tactics of military operations these conditions caused, or the practical results of partisan detachments' actions. This article's new contribution is that it comprehensively studies the positive and negative factors that had the most direct effects on the formation and activities of this movement in these two regions. The partisan movements will be described and specific features identified and analyzed.

The choice of a study and comparative analysis of the partisan movements in western Serbia and in the Rostov oblast is justified by certain important circumstances. They are distinguished by its large size, how long it persisted, and relatively high effectiveness. Also, these areas were quite unique due to their natural and geographic conditions and the ethnic and social composition of the two populations, which each had specific ideological and political views. Furthermore, the Russian Rostov oblast was chosen due a lack of specific research into the partisans' formation and specific combat actions in the Rostov oblast as a whole.

We have successfully analyzed and introduced into the literature many new, important, and diverse archival documents discovered at the Center for Documentation of the Modern History of the Rostov oblast (CDNIRO), the main archive for the Rostov oblast. These sources complement and significantly expand the materials available in published collections of documents on the partisan movement on the Don. Due to the Soviet state political system and the political censorship during that period, one must bear in mind that collections of documents from the Soviet period¹ had a clearly expressed communist political and ideological slant. This also affected the choice of specific documents that reflected only the positive aspects of this movement and emphasized the leading role of the Communist Party representatives within it. However, there is no direct falsification or artificial exaggeration of the role and scale of the partisan movement in the oblast in these materials. At the same time, the very fact that many documents on the activities of the Don partisans were identified and published was positive and contributed to the expansion of the sources available that are relevant to this issue. Modern collections of documents and materials are devoted to the events of the Great Patriotic War in the Rostov oblast in general and contain few sources on the Don partisan movement.²

¹ Rezvanov 1980.

² Rezvanov 1980; Bequeathed to remember... Don Archives - the 70th anniversary of the Great Victory. Collection of documents and materials 2015; Levendorskaya 2020.

This study of the emergence and activities of the partisan movement in the Rostov oblast is significant because it was on the front line between the fall of 1941 and the fall of 1943 and was occupied by the enemy twice, once in October–November 1941 and again in July 1942–August 1943. In this study, special attention has been given to a thorough comparative analysis to identify and fully describe the common and unique features of the partisan movements in these specific regions.

The partisan movement in the Soviet Union was distinguished by its broad scale and the diversity of those in the partisan ranks according to ethnicity, gender, age, and social status. The total number of partisans exceeded one million, and they fought the enemy within six thousand partisan detachments.³ This movement has been investigated in several studies addressing issues related to it, including monographs by V. N. Andrianov, L. N. Bychkov, A. D. Kolesnik, T. D. Medvedev, and A. M. Sinitsyn,⁴ and in a number of general collections.⁵

There is considerable Serbian historiography devoted to the partisan movement in Yugoslavia during the Second World War. Modern researchers refer to it as the Resistance Movement. Within the historiography, particular attention has been given to considering the largest and important uprising, militarily and politically, which took place in western Serbia and the emergence of the so-called Republic of Užica. The fundamental work on the Užice uprising remains the work edited by U. Kostić.⁶ Also of note are works by V. Glišić, which are based on archival sources and cover a wide range of issues related to the formation and development of the Užice Republic,⁷ and a monograph by N. Ljubičić, which covers a large range of party documents and memoirs of participants of those events.⁸ A general overview of the uprising in the works of B. Petranović is also well regarded.⁹

Modern Serbian historiography examines the complex and contradictory political processes among those who took part in the uprising. It analyzes the complex relationship between various leading political forces—the Partisans of the People’s Liberation Movement and the Chetniks. This is a subject of considerable interest, as confirmed by German researcher K. Schmider’s monograph published in 2002, which analyzes this issue and the entire spectrum of political struggle in general during the war in Yugoslavia¹⁰

However, historiography has not comprehensively investigated differing views on nation and state and the differing politics and ideology among those who participated the Yugoslav partisan movement. The influence of these views on the Yugoslav partisans’ military and political positions during their struggle against the German occupiers and their local political opponents remains an issue of debate.

³ Russia and the USSR in the wars of the twentieth century 2001: 451.

⁴ E.g.: Andrianov 1981; Bychkov 1965; Kolesnik 1988; Sinitsyn 1985; Medvedev, 2022: 146–153.

⁵ E.g.: The war is behind enemy lines. On some problems of the history of the Soviet partisan movement during the Great Patriotic War 1974; History of the partisan movement in the Russian Federation during the Great Patriotic War 2001; Zolotarev 2001.

⁶ Anić et al. 1982: 871.

⁷ Glišić 1986: 288.

⁸ Ljubičić 1982: 476.

⁹ Petranović 1988: 516.

¹⁰ Schmider 2002: 627.

Attention should also be given to modern research into various interesting and practically unexplored aspects of the Serbian partisan movement as well as some of the issues related to relations and military and political cooperation between the Soviet Union and the resistance movement in Yugoslavia, practical cooperation between the USSR and the Draža Mihajlović's Serbian partisan movement, and Soviet citizens' participation in the local resistance movement. These issues in particular are covered in research articles published in reputable Russian and Serbian scholarly journals by the Russian researcher A.Y. Timofeev,¹¹ who works in Serbia. His works focusing on consideration of historical memory of the events of the war in Russia and Serbia are also of considerable interest.¹²

Contributions by the Soviet and Yugoslav partisans to the victory over Nazi Germany and its allies and local collaborators in the occupied countries are highly significant. This is not in doubt not only in modern Russian and Serbian historiography but also in the works of modern authoritative researchers of this issue in other countries.¹³

Various aspects of the formation and combat activities of the Don partisans have been touched on in a number of general studies that considered the events that took place during the war in the Rostov oblast, as do works by S.A. Kislitsyn and I.G. Kislitsyna on the history of the Rostov oblast,¹⁴ I.S. Markusenko's¹⁵ on the Rostov oblast during the war, and V. P. Trut's on the volunteer movement in the oblast and on the Don Cossacks' participation in the partisan movement.¹⁶

2. The Struggle of Serbian Volunteers against the German Occupation

The People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, which was composed almost exclusively of mainly Serbian volunteers, was the fourth largest allied army after the armies of the USSR, the USA, and the UK. The enemy had to send very significant armed forces to fight against the Yugoslav partisans, which included twelve to fifteen German divisions during various periods of the war in addition to the Italian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Croatian units and armed nationalist formations.

However, even after the Yugoslav army was defeated and the country was occupied, the Serbian people did not resign themselves to defeat and instead rose up in an armed struggle against the invaders and their collaborators. In doing so, the clearly expressed patriotic positions traditional for Serbs were certainly manifested. The widespread terror unleashed against the Serbs by the Croatian Ustaše, which later resulted in the mass murder of a large number of Serbian civilians and also contributed to a fairly rapid and significant increase in the scale of their resistance. As early as May 1941, the Croatian Ustaše began to brutally exterminate the Serbian civilian population. Thousands of Serbs fled to the mountains to escape the massacres and formed partisan units, and these people often held

¹¹ Timofeev 2010: 152–166; Timofeev 2011a: 46–61; Timofeev 2011b: 133–140; Timofeev 2012: 241–258.

¹² Timofeev 2018: 60–67; Timofeev 2020: 142–156; Timofeev 2021: 136–150.

¹³ E.g.: Cornish 2014; Grenkevich 2013; Heuser 2013; Hill 2019; Howell 1956; Musial 2009; Murray 2019; Shepherd, Pattinson 2010.

¹⁴ Kislitsyn, Kislitsyna 2012.

¹⁵ Markusenko 1977.

¹⁶ Trut 2020: 177–218; Trut 2023: 38–43.

different political and ideological views. A large-scale uprising began in Serbia. By August, the rebel *odredi* (detachments) numbered around eight thousand fighters. Due to their efforts, large areas around Belgrade were liberated. At that time, the Serbian partisans were joined by the Chetniks—formations of Serbian soldiers and officers of the former Royal Army along with volunteers from other social groups within the local population, all led by Colonel Dragoljub “Draža” Mihajlović. However, the Partisans and Chetniks were not organizationally united and acted independently, with their armed detachments operating exclusively under their own commands.

The uprising was widely supported by the local Serbian population, which, despite the natural presence of different social classes and supporters of different political views and positions, was dominated by deeply nationalist and patriotic ideas, views, and moods. The political divisions posed a very serious problem for both those directly taking part in the anti-Hitler uprising and the local population that supported them. Some of the rebels fighting with the Yugoslav People’s Liberation Army were pro-Communist, while the Chetniks, who were also fighting the German Nazis, held directly opposite pro-monarchist political views. Nevertheless, in the first stages of the uprising, the Partisan and Chetniks detachments acted together against the occupiers and their accomplices from among the local collaborators.

Unlike the Chetniks, the Partisans had a broader social base. The general population saw the partisans as their defenders against the German Nazis, the collaborators, and the brutal Croatian Ustaša detachments.

The Partisans in the People’s Liberation Army continued their propaganda work to explain to the inhabitants of the Užice district why the archives of the communal administrations had been burned and lists of conscripts and other documents destroyed. One of the leaflets claimed that “The traitor Nedić [leader of the collaborators] is ready to shed your blood for Hitler. The Serbian people will not allow this. We, the people’s fighters, have seized the lists of conscripts and will ruthlessly punish anyone who joins the communal council and thereby serves the occupiers! To arms! Join our partisan ranks!”¹⁷ The German command in Serbia was forced to evacuate troops from the area around Užice because they were in danger of being cut off and annihilated. The Germans were evacuated from Užice on September 21 and from Požega on September 22.

Both towns were handed over to Draža Mihailović’s Chetniks and the Serbian gendarmerie. In July 1947 at the Hostages Trial of top Nazi warlords accused of war crimes in the Balkans and Greece (the seventh of the twelve Subsequent Nuremberg Trials), Franz Böhme (plenipotentiary commanding general in Serbia, war criminal, head of the occupation administration) said when describing the situation in Serbia at the time, “I made a difficult decision: I left Užice and Čačak, where we suffered heavy losses, and withdrew troops to Kraljevo. This decision was critically received at my headquarters and in the army headquarters it was met unfavorably.”¹⁸

In the liberated territories of western Serbia and Šumadija, which were later unofficially and conventionally called the Užice Republic (September 24–November 29,

¹⁷ Ljubičić 1982: 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 136.

1941) after the city of Užice, a peculiar internal political situation developed: There was no single political authority there. In fact, here the Chetnik and Partisan leadership acted independently from one another, so there was no single authority. The leading role there, due to their larger numbers, was played by the Partisans of the People's Liberation Movement.

We believe that special consideration should be given to the fact that, together with the liberation struggle against the Nazi occupiers, a real civil war had begun in the former Yugoslavia, which, before its collapse, was officially called the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The extremely complicated and confusing situation was aggravated by the increasing contradictions among Tito's Partisans, who were pro-communist and advocated for the restoration of a united Yugoslavia, and the Draža Mihailović's Serbian Chetniks, who held pro-monarchy and Serbian national, and even partially nationalist, positions. This subsequently led to large-scale and very fierce armed clashes between the Partisans and the Chetniks, resulting in numerous casualties for them and their supporters among the local civilian population. This was a real tragedy for the Serbian people, who were waging a massive, heroic struggle against the German Nazi occupiers.

Meanwhile, the uprising in western Serbia was growing. In August 1941, to reinforce the German units and subdivisions of various collaborationist structures in the area, the occupational forces were forced to send new reinforcements to the Užice district, and they delivered three to four hundred armed Albanian gendarmes from the Sandžak, Kosovo, and Metohija.¹⁹

In the autumn of 1941, the occupying forces launched a broad offensive against the Partisans. During the suppression of the uprising, the Nazis committed the largest massacres in October 1941 with the execution of 5,000 hostages in Kraljevo and 2300 hostages in Kragujevac.²⁰ Active hostilities continued until December 1941. The main group of Partisans was forced to leave liberated territory and withdraw to the Sandžak. By the end of 1941, there were around 80,000 people in the Partisan detachments, and at the same time the number of occupation troops and local formations cooperating with them grew to 620,000.²¹

To understand the political situation for the volunteer liberation movement, it is extremely important to identify the participation of women in this underground struggle. Just as they actively did in Yugoslavia, women in the Soviet Union joined the volunteer ranks only in Nazi-occupied territory. It is important to understand the motives for joining such units. We have chosen to look at an Užice detachment that was one of the first to start the resistance against the invaders. The Užice uprising became one of the largest hotbeds of the People's Liberation War. Some of the women who actively participated were Olga Đurović, Ljubinka Đorđević. Đorđević, a nurse and member of the Yugoslav Communist Party, became the first nurse of the Užice partisan detachment and supervised courses in Radobuđa. Jelena "Lela" Gmizović from the village of Seče Reke, Jelena Blagojević, a teacher from the village of Makovište, Mileva Kosovac, a teacher from the village of Taor, and a number of other partisan women also became active participants in the uprising.

¹⁹ Ljubičić 1982: 47.

²⁰ Glišić 1970: 289.

²¹ See: "People's liberation war in Yugoslavia 1941–45 • Great Russian Encyclopedia - electronic version." n.d. Old.bigenc.ru. Accessed December 30, 2023. https://old.bigenc.ru/military_science/text/2249680

Although women fighters and nurses are usually referred to as women partisans, this also referred to women participating in the volunteer movement. In post-war Yugoslav society, the typical image of a female partisan was that of a young woman who was armed and fought shoulder to shoulder with her comrades-in-arms and also treated the wounded.²² It is noteworthy that, unlike the Chetnik formations, the Partisan Movement advocated for the full emancipation of women in post-war socialist Yugoslavia. According to Stanko Mladenović,²³ the percentage of women participating in the first Partisan units ranged from 2 to 20 percent. According to official statistics, by the end of the war, approximately 100,000 women had joined the Yugoslav People's Liberation Army. The Women's Anti-Fascist Front of Yugoslavia (AFŽJ) emerged from the Yugoslav resistance, and it held its first conference in Bosanski Petrovac in northwest Bosnia on December 5–7, 1942. The actions of Partisan units during the Užice uprising were among the most effective.

Dana Milosavljević, who was later awarded the Order of National Hero, said that ever since she was a child she had wanted to fight as an equal with men, and that reading the works of August Bebel before the war motivated her to join the Partisans: "At the beginning of the war I joined the Partisans. At first, I was a nurse in a platoon of the Third Užice Partisan Unit, and later I joined the medical corps of the First Proletarian Brigade..."²⁴

Milica Kovačević was a unit orderly in the Racan Battalion. At the end of November 1941, she came with partisan units to the Sandžak. She was sent back to the field from Radoinja to Užice. On December 13, 1941, on her way back to Stapari, Kovačević was captured and taken first to Užice and then to the Banica camp, and from there she was returned to Užice and sentenced to death. She was hanged in Belgrade in 1941, and her husband Vukola, deputy commander of the Užice Partisan Unit, committed suicide after they were surrounded to avoid falling into enemy hands. Olga Đurović,²⁵ born in 1920 in Užice and a teacher by profession, was the KPJ liaison for the Užice district and a member of SKOJ. Ever since she was a teenager, she had held progressive views and was a dedicated agitator in her locality. Her safe house was a gathering place for progressive youth. Often revolvers and explosives could be found in her handbag. Olga died very early on at the beginning of the uprising in the village of Zlakusi on August 18, 1941.

Similarly, Olga Đurović's activities were so significant that her name was even mentioned in secret German reports. A report from the Communications Department on the situation in the Užice district states, *inter alia*... "All appointees spread communism among peasants in the villages mentioned. Through the communist Olga Đurovic, a teacher from Tatinac, they maintain constant contact with the town." A search was called for the Partisan. Her arrest would reveal the underground connections of the communists in the district. Đurovic's life was tragically cut short on the night of August 18–19, 1941 under mysterious circumstances. Her work was continued by Ljubinka Đorđević, a nurse and head of the medical course in Radobuđa and the first nurse of the Užice partisan unit, Stojisava Savović

²² Pantelić 2013: 239–250.

²³ Mladenović 1980: 211.

²⁴ Pantelić 2013: 239–250.

²⁵ Vujačić 1975: 462–463.

from Radobuđa, who died in 1943, Vojinka Pajić, Milka and Mileva Glišić, and Ljubica Radoječić from Arilje, and many other women who provided medical assistance.

3. Soviet Partisans in the Rostov Oblast: Features of the Struggle against the Invaders

The volunteer movement in the Rostov oblast, and in principle throughout the country, was characterized by much activity and widespread participation. According to the authoritative researcher A. M. Sinitsyn, during the war the people of the USSR submitted over twenty million requests for enlistment to the military and the Soviet party organizations,²⁶ but a significant number of these applications were denied due to various objective and subjective circumstances (underage, poor health, official “reservation”). During the Great Patriotic War, the official number of volunteers in the USSR enrolled in various volunteer militia formations was over four million.²⁷

In the Rostov oblast, in terms of the total prewar population the proportion of volunteers who applied for and enlisted in the regular army (regiments and divisions of the people’s militia) and irregular volunteer formations (fighter squads, partisan units), was very significant.²⁸

Taking into account the unfavorable course of events in the initial period of the war, on July 18, 1941, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks adopted a special resolution for “the organization of the fight in the rear of German troops.” Local party and Soviet governing bodies were ordered to begin organizing partisan detachments and underground groups that were supposed to operate behind enemy lines in occupied Soviet territory.

These preparations also began in the Rostov oblast. In preparation for a potential enemy occupation of the oblast, in August 1941, organizational measures taken under the utmost secrecy to form partisan detachments in rural areas and underground groups in the cities of the Don oblast. Over a short period, eighty-three partisan detachments with a total number of around 3395 people were formed.²⁹

In September and October, the regional administration of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs organized short-term training courses for leaders of future partisan detachments. The tactics of guerrilla actions, handling domestic and foreign weapons, the basics of mine explosives and making homemade mines in makeshift conditions were presented to the leaders. The training of ordinary personnel was carried out in the existing fighter detachments of the oblast. They studied the tactics of partisan actions, subversive warfare, and underwent fire training. According to eyewitnesses, each detachment had Polish rifles,³⁰ 1–2 light machine guns, 200–300 grenades, 25–30 kilos of explosives,

²⁶ Sinitsyn 1985: 26

²⁷ Kolesnik 1988: 10.

²⁸ Trut 2023: 40.

²⁹ Rezvanov 1980: 162.

³⁰ Polish rifles apparently ended up in Soviet armories after the Red Army’s 1939 campaign in Western Ukraine and Western Belarus. Arming militias with weapons captured during the First World War and the Polish campaign of 1939 and stored since then was a common practice at that time, due to the acute shortage of

detonators, and a considerable number of cartridges. Detachments based on the banks of the Taganrog Bay on the Sea of Azov and nearby rivers prepared and hid boats in the water. Each detachment developed methods of communication with regular Red Army units; safe houses were prepared in cities, towns and villages; and special messengers were appointed to communicate with local underground workers.³¹

Thus, despite serious difficulties, there were significant and extensive preparations done to create and equip the partisan detachments in the Rostov oblast even before it was occupied by the enemy. However, not all of what had been planned was implemented. Moreover, there were obvious shortcomings during these preparations, and serious mistakes were made.

Furthermore, the terrain of the steppes had a determining influence on the scale, tactics, and, accordingly, the results of the guerrilla units' efforts in the oblast. It was almost entirely unsuitable as a permanent or long-term location for detachments. Thus, many detachments were based behind the front line immediately behind the Red Army. Accordingly, many detachments could only operate as reconnaissance and sabotage groups, and they crossed the front line repeatedly and at great risk. The scale and intensity of partisan fighting increased as the enemy advanced deeper into the Rostov oblast. After the advancing units of the German army entered the western districts of the oblast in September 1941, the partisan detachments from Fedorovsky, Taganrog, Neklinovsky, and a number of other districts deployed there began to engage in active combat.

In the autumn and winter of 1941, partisan detachments were most active and successful in the Neklinovsky district (Brave-1 and Brave-2) and in the Azov district (Azov). These detachments were stationed in the Azov marshes. A large number of detachments were forced to operate from the front unoccupied part of the oblast. In doing so, the Don partisans had to cross the front line to carry out sabotage and reconnaissance missions, which created additional risks and difficulties.

In the spring of 1942, sixty-seven partisan detachments consisting of 2,324 people were active in the oblast.³² Along with securing the partisans at the enemy's rear, the party and Soviet leaderships of the oblast, along with the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the USSR carried out extensive work on the formation and comprehensive training of special underground groups for future activity in the cities of Rostov-on-Don, Novocherkassk, Shakhty, Millerovo, and Kamensk in preparation for potential enemy occupation.

We discovered some reports and memos from party and Soviet workers and from NKVD employees who were engaged in special training for future underground fighters in Fond № 3 of the Documentation Center for the Recent History of the Rostov oblast (CDNIRO). This fond contains materials, including declassified ones, on the partisan movement. From our analysis we found that, despite propaganda about the enemy's imminent defeat and a new, powerful offensive by the Red Army, the oblast's party and

weapons mobilization stocks and losses of weapons during the initial period of the war. An indicative example, in particular, can be massive arming of the Moscow people's militia with such weapons. - V.T., O.E.

³¹ Rezvanov 1980: 163

³² Levendorskaya 2020: 362.

state leaders had quite realistically assessed the situation at the front and the possibility of a new, large-scale offensive by the German army. Naturally, they did not know the exact or even approximate date for the fascist offensive. Moreover, even those in the highest Soviet military and political leadership did not know the specific dates and direction of the 1942 summer attack. As a result, they were not expecting the powerful German offensive in the south, because they were expecting it to go in the direction of central Moscow.

However, for the leaders of the Rostov oblast, the likelihood was fairly obvious, which was the reason for all the necessary work to prepare the partisans and underground fighters for a subsequent occupation of the Rostov oblast. This was all conducted in absolute secrecy so as not to reveal the identities of future underground agents who would operate behind enemy lines, constantly in fear of being identified and subsequently arrested. Even those within the top regional and local NKVD leadership knew of very few who were involved. Later, when the enemy occupied these settlements, these groups engaged in effective reconnaissance and sabotage.³³ During the summer and autumn of 1942, the local partisan movement significantly expanded and intensified.

One of the essential features of the partisan movement in the Rostov oblast was the so-called Cossack factor. A very large-scale volunteer movement of Cossacks arose on the Don during the first days of the war. They joined the newly formed 15th and 116th Cossack volunteer cavalry divisions from which the 5th Don Guards Cossack Cavalry Corps was later formed. Hundreds of thousands of Don Cossacks fought in various rifle, cavalry, artillery, and other units and formations, and Cossack volunteers actively joined partisan detachments and underground groups. Due to the serious political split in the Cossack milieu during the Civil War, at this time the German command also made considerable efforts to attract the Cossacks to its side. To counteract these aspirations, the partisan movement's Central Headquarters issued a special directive to the movement's Southern Headquarters on July 29, 1942, which announced this and mentioned the need for hereditary Don Cossacks in every partisan detachment in the Rostov oblast.³⁴ The directive also pointed out that, when forming special partisan groups, Cossacks should be included in the already active partisan detachments and, they should be encouraged to carry out necessary agitation among the Cossack population.³⁵ The formation of small, mounted partisan detachments was also mentioned. They had greater mobility, which was very important when operating in the steppes.³⁶

The partisans in the Don Cossack detachment from the Migulinsky district fought courageously and bravely against the enemy. During the Red Army's retreat, the partisan D. P. Teplitsyn, who knew the area well, helped the headquarters of the 9th, 13th, and 277th Soviet rifle divisions and many separate groups of Red Army soldiers avoid capture, led them to the Don River, and assisted them in crossing it. During this operation, the son of the Meshkovskaya MTS's agronomist, a teenager named Vladimir Tsybenko, provided considerable assistance to D. P. Teplitsyn. All in all, with the help of the local population,

³³ CDNIRO coll. R-3, aids 1, fol. 67, pp. 19-20.

³⁴ CDNIRO coll. R-3, aids 1, fol. 13, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 7.

the partisans of this detachment led 1,087 Soviet soldiers and officers out of the encirclement.³⁷

A true example of courage and heroism was an act by Ekaterina Miroshnikova, a partisan and Cossack in this detachment. She organized several underground groups at the German rear that conducted active reconnaissance and sabotage and carried out communication between them and the partisan detachment's command. Miroshnikova was captured by the Germans while out on a mission. The courageous young woman was tormented and tortured for eight days, but she betrayed none of her comrades and never gave up the location of the partisan detachment. The brave partisan was then executed. We found a handwritten memo dated May 29, 1943 from Dmitry Konstantinovich Merkulov (commander of the Don Cossack partisan detachment, and later secretary of the Migulinsky district Committee of the CPSU) to the secretary of the Central Committee of the Komsomol, called "About the feat of Komsomol member Katya Miroshnikova," which noted, "When leaving for her third mission and having said her goodbyes, Miroshnikova gave the following statement to the commander of the detachment, which revealed the inner workings of a young Komsomol girl and a great patriot...Katya is also Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. I wish the youth of the Don, the Cossack youth, would learn about their fellow countrywoman, a Cossack Komsomol member who gave her life for the Motherland and fought the enemy the way Katya Miroshnikova fought and hated the enemy."³⁸ Miroshnikova's feat is also mentioned in a report dated May 29, 1943 from L. Zavyalova, the secretary of Migulinsky district Komsomol committee, which contains a description of her moral qualities and ideological and political views, along with and a description of her feat. This note was prepared and sent to the Komsomol regional committee with a request that it be published it in the All-Union newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the Komsomol's primary newspaper. This request was motivated by the fact that, "By her example, we educate our youth. She teaches us patriotism, love for the Motherland, faith in victory."³⁹

Looking at these documents, one can see a true feat of heroism performed by a brave young partisan. However, there was also a desire to widely publicize the event in comparison with a similar feat by Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, who was known throughout the country, as a means of propaganda. Naturally, one must bear in mind that these documents were written by people who had rather strong Soviet ideological and political beliefs. Moreover, they were intended for the public sphere and carried an appropriate ideological burden. The authors wanted to show that such great heroes as Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya existed in many parts of the country, and in the Rostov oblast in particular. This was certainly understandable, considering there was a brutal war going on and, as in all warring countries, state propaganda was in place. At the same time, familiarity with these documents written by party and Komsomol hacks raises a very important and difficult question about the relationship between a real feat by a heroic partisan and the Soviet agitation that used it for its own purposes.

³⁷ Trut 2020: 196.

³⁸ Trut 2020: 196-197.

³⁹ CDNIRO coll. R-3, aids 1, fol. 193, p. 94.

Another specific feature of the partisan movement in the Rostov oblast was the organization of new partisan detachments that were specially trained and sent there with specific missions by officers of the NKVD or the Red Army. This practice was used by the Soviet command in the Belarus, Ukraine, Leningrad, and Pskov oblasts, and has been very well proven. There were numerous dense forests and other good natural shelters in these oblasts. There were none in the Rostov oblast. Nevertheless, specially trained officers were also sent there to organize partisan detachments and conduct further active reconnaissance, sabotage, and other activities. In our opinion, this can be explained by the fact that the territory of the oblast was very important militarily and operationally. This is generally confirmed by very significant intensification in the activities of local partisan detachments during the Battle of Stalingrad. Detachments in the oblast led by officers purposely sent there were organized and named after Stalin and Kirov or given names such as For the Quiet Don, Groza, Avenger, and For the Motherland.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

At various periods during the enemy occupation, there were 163 partisan detachments and underground groups in total with around 4,990 members active in the Rostov oblast.⁴⁰ They carried out hundreds of military operations, conducted active propaganda campaigns within the occupied territories, freed Soviet prisoners of war, and disrupted the German occupation authorities' efforts to collect and export foodstuffs and send local youth to work in Germany.

Altogether, the partisans in the Rostov oblast killed 5,329 German soldiers and officers and captured 4,126; seized 4,514 rifles, seventy-six machine guns, 435 vehicles, twenty-four guns of various calibers, and six mortars; destroyed 720 vehicles and forty-three motorcycles; knocked out nineteen tanks; blew up nine railway bridges and nine warehouses; and derailed hundreds of carriages and locomotives. They saved thousands of tons of grain and tens of thousands of cattle the Germans were preparing to take to Germany.⁴¹ Around seven hundred Don partisans died heroically in an unequal struggle with the invaders. In total, around five hundred partisans and underground fighters from the Rostov oblast were awarded orders and medals for their courage and heroism.

During World War II, the peoples of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia heroically fought against the German invaders, their collaborating allies and henchmen, and suffered heavy losses as a result: 26,600,000 Soviet citizens and more than 1,700,000 Yugoslavs—one out of every ten inhabitants in prewar Yugoslavia—died.⁴² A considerable contribution to the overall victory over the enemy was made by Soviet and Yugoslav partisans, and in particular the partisans in the Rostov oblast in the USSR and in western Serbia.

Using the Rostov oblast partisans as an example, a comparative analysis of the essence, forms of organization, political orientation, social composition, the strategies and

⁴⁰ Trut 2020: 200.

⁴¹ Strepukhov 1944.

⁴² See: "People's liberation war in Yugoslavia 1941–45 • Great Russian Encyclopedia - electronic version" n.d. Old.bigenc.ru. Accessed December 30, 2023. https://old.bigenc.ru/military_science/text/2249680.

tactics employed by the Soviet partisans and the Serbian partisans and their formations in western Serbia, indicates that the two movements shared common features, and, of course, significant specifics, due to both general public and political conditions and particular exclusively local conditions.

One aspect of this was people's motivations for joining partisan detachments. It is clear that in each individual case, the motives behind an individual choosing to join the partisan movement were purely subjective. As we have already noted, the vast majority joined the partisans purely voluntarily to fight the occupiers and the local collaborators. They were driven solely by patriotic sentiment. Some, usually those from the ruling party, Soviet and economic workers who were communists, and those who held relevant leadership positions in party or Soviet bodies, organizations and institutions before the war, were sent by a decision of higher party-Soviet structures to partisan detachments to fill leadership positions. There were also people among the partisans who joined by chance or out of necessity when fleeing persecution by the occupation authorities, but there were very few of them. No one kept them in the detachments by force, and it was much easier and safer to hide alone among the local population. There were many such cases throughout the country's occupied oblasts.

We can cite one strongly illustrative example from a solid special military-statistical study based on archival materials that has been very well-received by local and foreign professional historians, including those in the West. It looks at the number and fate of former Soviet officers who found themselves in the occupied territories after the retreat of the Red Army. According to this study, between 1941 and 1943, after the liberation of the Soviet oblasts from the German occupiers, more than one million Soviet officers in these oblasts and hiding from the German authorities were re-enlisted in the Red Army.⁴³ Before enlisting in the army, all of them were thoroughly vetted to ensure they had not cooperated with the occupiers. The example, in our opinion, is more than indicative. Unlike officers, it was much easier for ordinary citizens and ordinary Red Army soldiers to disappear among locals, but many made a dangerous choice and willingly joined the partisans. We also found an official document attesting to this in the Rostov oblastal archive.⁴⁴ We could see from this document a conscious and selfless choice made by a simple villager from the oblast who voluntarily chose to fight the enemy.

The situation in Serbia was different. There, the fight against the German invaders was carried out by partisan detachments and groups with different political orientations. They were led by the relevant military and political forces and commanders of from various social and often ethnic groups. The leading forces of the anti-Nazi resistance were the pro-communist Partisans in the National Liberation Movement and the Chetniks, who shared pro-monarchist ideological and political views and had their own corresponding political detachments. But by November 1941, their temporary tactical military and political alliance had shattered and fierce clashes between them began. This was indicative of the aggressive civil war raging in the country. This led not only to a weakening of the local patriots' united front of resistance against the invaders, but also in particular, among other factors, to real

⁴³ Russia and the USSR in the wars 2001: 451.

⁴⁴ CDNIRO coll. R-3, aids 1, fol. 45, pp. 77–78.

ethnic cleansing by the Croatian Ustaše and very high casualties among the patriotic Serbian fighters on both sides, and especially among the peaceful Serbian population.

Soviet and Serbian partisans used various military and strategic visions and specific combat military tactics when conducting operations. The military, political, social, and natural conditions in the Rostov oblast and in western Serbia during the war and the enemy occupation also determined the specific tactics for their military actions. The nature of the military operations for the partisans of the Rostov oblast and western Serbia was significantly influenced by natural and geographic factors. Thus, the presence of a large number of enemy troops on the frontline in the German-occupied Rostov oblast, the peculiarity of the natural and mostly steppe landscape of the Rostov oblast, the almost total lack of significant forested areas and other natural shelters for deployment of partisan detachments, and the proximity of the front all had a direct impact on their tactics. The lack of natural shelters made it almost impossible to use large partisan formations there, so the Don partisans operated in fairly small groups. This also determined the tactics for their military operations, which consisted mostly of sudden, quick raids on enemy garrisons and important military and economic facilities by small partisan detachments and even small combat sabotage groups. A significant portion of the detachments were forced to operate from the front line in the unoccupied part of the region as sabotage and reconnaissance groups, which was not very different from similar formations of the regular army. At the same time, the Don partisans were forced to cross the front line to carry out sabotage and reconnaissance missions, which created additional risks and difficulties.

In this respect, the natural and geographic conditions of western Serbia seemed more conducive for conducting partisan operations, although they were not entirely favorable. The presence of medium-high mountain ranges with hilly foothills there were much better suited to conducting partisan operations than the steppe landscape of the Rostov oblast. In comparison to the Rostov oblast, in western Serbia, the occupational forces were relatively small, and there were large mountainous and forested areas highly conducive as bases for military operations by local partisans. Therefore, in tactical terms, they could conduct large-scale military operations, operate in large formations, carry out long and extensive military raids, and capture and maintain control over significant territory such as the Užice Republic.

Despite the local differences and specifics, the Soviet partisans in the Rostov oblast and the partisans in western Serbia had some important features in common, namely great patriotism, a desire to defend their homeland in a merciless struggle against the invaders, perseverance, courage, bravery, and personal and collective heroism.

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**ДОБРОВОЉАЧКИ ПОКРЕТ ПАРТИЗАНА
ТОКОМ ДРУГОГ СВЕТСКОГ РАТА
У РОСТОВСКО ОБЛАСТИ СОВЈЕТСКОГ САВЕЗА
И ЗАПАДНОЈ СРБИЈИ: КОМПАРАТИВНА АНАЛИЗА**

Резиме

У чланку, на основу анализе објављених и новопронађених извора, чини се покушај упоредне анализе основних садржаја, природе, опсега, друштвеног и националног састава, политичких и идеолошких погледа и позиција, као и идеолошких заснованости и практичних резултата борбе учесника у анти-нацистичком отпору током Другог светског рата унутар партизанских покрета у Ростовској области и западној Србији. Посебна пажња је посвећена идентификацији, опсежној карактеризацији и детаљној компаративној анализи и заједничких и особених одлика ових области унутар две различите државе које су јединствене у погледу својих природних и географских услова, етничког и друштвеног састава популација, идеолошких погледа и политичких позиција. У раду су показани аспекти попут утицаја политичких, друштвено-економских и етно-друштвених фактора на размере ових покрета, степен подршке локалног становништва, резултати њихових активности у свакој области понаособ, како уопштено, тако и у смислу њихове повезаности и упоређивања.

Кључне речи: Други светски рат, добровољци, партизански покрет, Ростовска област, западна Србија.

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ISTRAŽIVANJA – JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL RESEARCHES 35, 199-215